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# **Liquid chromatographic analysis of geological organic substances of industrial importance**

**By**

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This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for  
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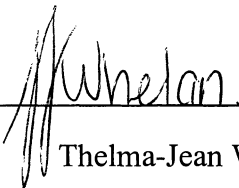
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Thelma-Jean Whelan

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*Do you not know? Have you not heard?*

*The Lord in the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.*

*He will not grow tired or weary and his understanding no one can fathom.*

*He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.*

*Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall;*

*but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.*

*They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not be faint.*

***Isaiah 40:28-31***

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## ***TABLE OF CONTENTS***

<b>LIST OF FIGURES .....</b>	<b>VI</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES .....</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>XI</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1. ALUMINA INDUSTRY .....	2
1.1.1. The Australian alumina industry.....	2
1.1.2. Bauxite .....	3
1.1.3. Bayer Process .....	5
1.1.4. Crystallisation .....	7
1.1.4.1. <i>Nucleation</i> .....	7
1.1.4.2. <i>Crystal Growth</i> .....	8
1.2. HUMIC SUBSTANCES .....	10
1.2.1. Soil and aquatic humic substances.....	10
1.2.2. Bayer humic substances .....	12
1.2.3. Host guest theory .....	13
1.2.4. Organic Fractionation .....	15
1.2.4.1. <i>Organics in red mud</i> .....	15
1.2.4.2. <i>Other insoluble Organics</i> .....	16
1.2.5. Organics in solution .....	20
1.2.5.1. <i>Process differences due to temperature</i> .....	20
1.2.5.2. <i>Small molecular weight molecules</i> .....	23
1.2.5.3. <i>Intermediate molecular weight molecules</i> .....	25
1.2.5.4. <i>Large molecular weight molecules</i> .....	26
1.2.5.5. <i>Host guests in Bayer liquor extracts</i> .....	26
1.3. INSTRUMENTAL TECHNIQUES FOR THE ANALYSIS OF HUMIC SUBSTANCES .....	28
1.3.1. Nuclear Magnetic Resonance spectroscopy analysis of humic substances ...	28

---

1.3.2. Pyrolysis-gas chromatography/mass spectrometry analysis of humic substances.....	30
1.3.3. Infrared spectroscopy analysis of humic substances.....	32
1.4. LIQUID CHROMATOGRAPHY .....	34
1.4.1. Definition of chromatography.....	34
1.4.2. Parameters of HPLC .....	35
1.4.2.1. <i>Retention Factor</i> .....	36
1.4.2.2. <i>Selectivity</i> .....	36
1.4.2.3. <i>Efficiency</i> .....	37
1.4.2.4. <i>Resolution</i> .....	37
1.4.3. Liquid chromatographic modes of separation.....	38
1.4.3.1. <i>Normal phase</i> .....	38
1.4.3.2. <i>Reversed phase</i> .....	39
1.4.3.3. <i>Ion-exchange</i> .....	39
1.4.3.4. <i>Size-exclusion</i> .....	40
1.4.4. Multidimensional Chromatography .....	40
1.4.4.1. <i>Limitations of one-dimensional HPLC separations</i> .....	40
1.4.4.2. <i>Multidimensional HPLC separations</i> .....	42
1.4.5. Liquid chromatographic analysis of Bayer humic substances.....	45
1.5. THIS WORK .....	47
<b>CHAPTER 2: EXPERIMENTAL .....</b>	<b>48</b>
2.1. BAYER HUMIC SUBSTANCES.....	49
2.1.1. Extraction of humic substances from the Bayer liquor.....	49
2.1.2. Solvent extraction of Bayer humic substances.....	51
2.2. CHARACTERISATION OF BAYER HUMIC SUBSTANCES .....	52
2.2.1. Elemental Analysis .....	52
2.2.2. pH Analysis.....	53
2.2.3. Ash analysis .....	53
2.2.4. Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy.....	54
2.2.5. Nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy .....	54
2.2.5.1. <i>Solution state <sup>1</sup>H NMR</i> .....	54
2.2.5.2. <i>Solution state <sup>1</sup>H-<sup>1</sup>H NMR</i> .....	55

---

2.2.5.3. Solid state $^{13}\text{C}$ NMR.....	56
2.2.6. Gas chromatography/ mass spectrometry analysis .....	56
2.3. ONE-DIMENSIONAL HIGH-PERFORMANCE LIQUID CHROMATOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS.	57
2.3.1. Chemicals.....	58
2.3.2. Instrumentation .....	58
2.3.3. Sample preparation and chromatographic separation conditions .....	58
2.4. REVERSED PHASE COLUMN STUDY FOR THE SEPARATION OF HUMIC STANDARDS ..	59
2.4.1. Chemicals.....	59
2.4.2. Instrumentation .....	62
2.4.3. Sample preparation and chromatographic separation conditions .....	62
2.5. TWO-DIMENSIONAL HPLC SEPARATION OF BAYER HUMIC SUBSTANCES .....	63
2.5.1. Chemicals.....	63
2.5.2. Instrumentation .....	63
2.5.3. Sample preparation and chromatographic separation conditions .....	64
2.5.4. Liquid chromatography/ mass spectrometry analysis of two-dimensional HPLC fractions .....	65
<b>CHAPTER 3: CHARACTERISATION OF THE BAYER HUMIC SUBSTANCES .....</b>	<b>67</b>
3.1. INTRODUCTION.....	68
3.2. ELEMENTAL COMPOSITION.....	68
3.3. ANALYSIS OF BAYER HUMIC SUBSTANCES BY NMR .....	70
3.3.1. Solution state $^1\text{H}$ NMR .....	70
3.3.2. Solution state $^1\text{H}$ - $^1\text{H}$ NMR.....	72
3.3.3. Solid state $^{13}\text{C}$ NMR .....	76
3.4. ANALYSIS OF BAYER HUMIC SUBSTANCES BY FTIR.....	79
3.5. CONCLUSIONS .....	81
<b>CHAPTER 4: DEVELOPMENT OF A REVERSED PHASE HIGH- PERFORMANCE LIQUID CHROMATOGRAPHIC METHOD FOR THE ANALYSIS OF BAYER HUMIC SUBSTANCES.....</b>	<b>82</b>
4.1. Introduction .....	83

---

---

4.2. Reversed phase HPLC separation .....	84
4.3. Ion-suppression HPLC separation .....	85
4.4. Ion-pair HPLC separation.....	89
4.5. Solvent extraction of the Bayer humic substances .....	97
4.6. Conclusions .....	114
 <b>CHAPTER 5: STUDY OF THE SELECTIVITY OF REVERSED PHASE COLUMNS FOR THE SEPARATION OF SMALL COMPOUNDS AS HUMIC MIMICS .....</b>	 <b>117</b>
5.1. INTRODUCTION .....	118
5.2. COMPARISON OF RETENTION BEHAVIOUR .....	120
5.2.1. Information theory .....	120
5.2.2. Factor analysis.....	125
5.2.3. Reversed phase column comparison using information theory and factor analysis .....	132
5.3. COMPARISON OF BAND SHAPE.....	151
5.4. COMPARISON OF ELUTION ORDER .....	157
5.5. REVERSED PHASE COLUMN SELECTION .....	157
5.6. CONCLUSIONS .....	162
 <b>CHAPTER 6: UNRAVELLING THE COMPLEXITY OF BAYER HUMIC SUBSTANCES USING MULTIDIMENSIONAL HPLC ...</b>	 <b>164</b>
6.1. INTRODUCTION .....	165
6.2. DEVELOPMENT OF A TWO-DIMENSIONAL HPLC SEPARATION FOR BAYER HUMIC SUBSTANCES .....	167
6.3. MASS SPECTROMETRY ANALYSIS OF SECOND DIMENSIONAL BANDS .....	175
6.4. SEPARATIONS AND HUMIC SUBSTANCES BEHAVIOUR .....	184
6.5. CONCLUSIONS .....	191
 <b>CHAPTER 7: OVERVIEW .....</b>	 <b>192</b>

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7.1. DIFFICULTIES WITH ONE-DIMENSIONAL HPLC SEPARATIONS OF BAYER HUMIC SUBSTANCES .....	193
7.2. REVERSED PHASE COLUMNS FOR SEPARATIONS OF BAYER HUMIC SUBSTANCES..	197
7.3. TWO-DIMENSIONAL HPLC SEPARATIONS OF BAYER HUMIC SUBSTANCES .....	198
7.4. CONCLUSIONS .....	203
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>207</b>
<b>APPENDIX A .....</b>	<b>226</b>
<b>APPENDIX B .....</b>	<b>227</b>
<b>APPENDIX C .....</b>	<b>228</b>

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## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>FIGURE 2.1:</b> Diagram illustrating the extraction and isolation of the Bayer humic substances. ....	50
<b>FIGURE 2.2:</b> Structures of the polycarboxylic acids and polyphenol compounds used in reversed phase column study. ....	60
<b>FIGURE 2.2 (CONTINUED):</b> Structures of the polycarboxylic acids and polyphenol compounds used in reversed phase column study. ....	61
<b>FIGURE 3.1:</b> Solution $^1\text{H}$ NMR spectrum of the Bayer humic substances. Resonances A-N are assigned in the text. ....	71
<b>FIGURE 3.2:</b> $^1\text{H}$ - $^1\text{H}$ Homonuclear 2-D-correlation (COSY) spectrum of the aliphatic region of the Bayer humic substances. Assignments are described in the text. ....	73
<b>FIGURE 3.3:</b> $^1\text{H}$ - $^1\text{H}$ Homonuclear 2-D-correlation (COSY) spectrum of the aromatic region of the Bayer humic substances. Assignments are described in the text. ....	74
<b>FIGURE 3.4:</b> Cross polarisation (contact time of 1 ms) $^{13}\text{C}$ solid-state NMR spectrum of the Bayer humic substances. Structural groups are assigned. ....	78
<b>FIGURE 3.5:</b> Fourier transform Infra-red (FTIR) spectrum of the Bayer humic substances. ....	80
<b>FIGURE 4.1:</b> HPLC separation of the Bayer humic sample using reversed phase chromatography with a linear water/acetonitrile gradient at a rate of change of $1\% \text{ min}^{-1}$ . AU=arbitrary units ....	86
<b>FIGURE 4.2:</b> HPLC separation of the Bayer humic sample using ion-suppression chromatography with a linear 1% formic acid/acetonitrile gradient at a rate of change of $1\% \text{ min}^{-1}$ . AU=arbitrary units ....	88
<b>FIGURE 4.3:</b> HPLC separation of the Bayer humic sample using ion-pair chromatography with linear PIC A/acetonitrile gradient at a rate of change of $1\% \text{ min}^{-1}$ . AU=arbitrary units ....	91
<b>FIGURE 4.4:</b> HPLC gradient separation of the Bayer humic sample using ion-pair chromatography with linear PIC A/acetonitrile gradient at a rate of change of $0.17\% \text{ min}^{-1}$ . AU=arbitrary units ....	92
<b>FIGURE 4.5:</b> Development of a stepwise gradient for the separation of the Bayer humic sample. Isocratic PIC A [5 mM] for 30 min followed by a linear gradient from 100 % PIC A [5 mM] to 20% acetonitrile at $0.10\% \text{ min}^{-1}$ , then the gradient was held at 80% PIC A [5 mM] and 20% acetonitrile for 60 min,	

the gradient was continued running from 80% PIC A [5 mM] and 20% acetonitrile to 60% PIC A [5 mM] and 40% acetonitrile at 0.083% min <sup>-1</sup> . The gradient was then held for 120 minutes. AU=arbitrary units .....	94
<b>FIGURE 4.6:</b> Optimum HPLC separation of the Bayer humic sample. Isocratic PIC A [5 mM]/acetonitrile for 10min followed by a linear gradient from 100% PIC A[5 mM] to 18% acetonitrile at 0.056% min <sup>-1</sup> , then 82% PIC A [5 mM] and 18% acetonitrile to 57% PIC A [5 mM] and 43% acetonitrile at 0.083% min <sup>-1</sup> , then 50% PIC A [5 mM] and 50% acetonitrile for 5min. AU=arbitrary units. * =solvent change artefact .....	95
<b>FIGURE 4.7:</b> FTIR spectra of the solvent fractions: (a) Bayer humic sample, (b) diethyl ether fraction, (c) ethyl acetate fraction, (d) isopropyl alcohol fraction and (e) water fraction.....	100
<b>FIGURE 4.8:</b> Solution <sup>1</sup> H NMR spectra of the solvent fractions: (a) Bayer humic sample, (b) diethyl ether fraction, (c) ethyl acetate fraction, (d) isopropyl alcohol fraction and (e) water fraction.....	102
<b>FIGURE 4.9:</b> Solution <sup>1</sup> H NMR spectra of the solvent fractions – aliphatic region: (a) Bayer humic sample, (b) diethyl ether fraction, (c) ethyl acetate fraction, (d) isopropyl alcohol fraction and (e) water fraction.....	103
<b>FIGURE 4.10:</b> Solution <sup>1</sup> H NMR spectra of the solvent fractions – aromatic region: (a) Bayer humic sample, (b) diethyl ether fraction, (c) ethyl acetate fraction, (d) isopropyl alcohol fraction and (e) water fraction.....	104
<b>FIGURE 4.11:</b> GC/MS of methylated solvent fractions: (a) Bayer humic sample, (b) diethyl ether fraction, (c) ethyl acetate fraction, (d) isopropyl alcohol fraction and (e) water fraction. See Table 4.2 for chemical assignments. .	106
<b>FIGURE 4.12:</b> HPLC of fractions. (a) Blank, (b) Bayer humic sample, (c) diethyl ether fraction, (d) ethyl acetate fraction, (e) isopropyl alcohol fraction and (f) water fraction. *=solvent change artefact. ....	111
<b>FIGURE 4.13:</b> Diagrammatic representation of the proposed “hidden host guest model” (a) and “micellar host guest model” (b).....	113
<b>FIGURE 5.1:</b> Geometric plot visually representing the practical or effective peak capacity between the two chromatographic columns under comparison...	131
<b>FIGURE 5.2:</b> Structures of the polycarboxylic acids and polyphenol compounds used in this study ( <i>repeat of Figure 2.2</i> ). ....	136
<b>FIGURE 5.2 (CONTINUED):</b> Structures of the polycarboxylic acids and polyphenol compounds used in this study ( <i>repeat of Figure 2.2</i> ). ....	137
<b>FIGURE 5.3:</b> Normalised plot of the Luna C18 column versus the Luna Cyano column, number according to order of elution on the Luna C18.....	140

<b>FIGURE 5.4:</b> Geometric plot showing the practical peak capacity for the Luna C18 column versus the Luna Cyano column.....	142
<b>FIGURE 5.5:</b> Normalised plot of the Luna C18 column versus Waters XTerra™ RP <sub>18</sub> column, numbered according to elution order on the Luna C18. ....	144
<b>FIGURE 5.6:</b> Geometric plot showing the practical peak capacity for the Luna C18 column versus the Waters XTerra™ RP <sub>18</sub> column. ....	145
<b>FIGURE 5.7:</b> Normalised plot of the Luna C18 column versus Aqua C18 column, numbered according to elution order of the Luna C18. ....	147
<b>FIGURE 5.8:</b> Geometric plot showing the practical peak capacity for the Luna C18 column versus the Aqua C18 column. ....	148
<b>FIGURE 5.9:</b> Normalised plot of the Luna C18 column versus Synergi polar-RP column, numbered according to the elution order of the Luna C18. ....	149
<b>FIGURE 5.10:</b> Geometric plot showing the practical peak capacity for the Luna C18 column versus the Synergi polar-RP column.....	150
<b>FIGURE 5.11:</b> HPLC chromatograms for the separation of phthalic acid on (a) Luna C18, (b) Luna cyano, (c) XTerra™ RP <sub>18</sub> , (d) Aqua C18 and (e) Synergi polar-RP. ....	152
<b>FIGURE 5.12:</b> HPLC chromatograms for the separation of 1,2,4-benzenetricarboxylic acid on (a) Luna C18, (b) Luna cyano, (c) XTerra™ RP <sub>18</sub> , (d) Aqua C18 and (e) Synergi polar-RP. ....	153
<b>FIGURE 6.1:</b> Schematic diagram of two-dimensional HPLC column switching system; (a) System configuration for the separation of the Bayer humic sample on BioSep-S2000 SEC; (b) system configuration for the “heart-cutting” of the elution band in the first dimension and; (c) flushing of the sample loop onto the Synergi polar-RP column.....	169
<b>FIGURE 6.2:</b> Separation of the Bayer humic sample on the BioSep-S2000 size-exclusion column in the first dimension. AU=arbitrary units. ....	171
<b>FIGURE 6.3:</b> Bayer humic fractions cut from the first dimension at 3.80min (a), 5.88min (b) and 7.08min (c) and separated in the second dimension on the Synergi polar-RP column. AU=arbitrary units. ....	173
<b>FIGURE 6.4:</b> Three-dimensional surface representation of the three fractions cut from the first dimension at 3.80min, 5.88min and 7.08min that were subsequently separated in the second dimension.....	174
<b>FIGURE 6.5:</b> HPLC chromatogram of the fraction cut at 6.92 minutes in the first dimension that was subsequently separated in the second dimension. Bands at 15.25 (1), 17.30 (2) and 20.20 (3) minutes were collected for further analysis by mass spectrometry. AU=arbitrary units. ....	176

<b>FIGURE 6.6:</b> Negative ion ESI mass spectrum of the band collected at 15.25 minutes from the second dimension fraction cut at 6.92 minutes. ....	177
<b>FIGURE 6.7:</b> CID product ion spectra of band 1 collected at 15.25 minutes.....	178
<b>FIGURE 6.8:</b> Negative ion ESI mass spectrum of the band collected at 17.30 minutes collected from the second dimension fraction cut at 6.92 minutes.....	180
<b>FIGURE 6.9:</b> CID product ion spectra of band 2 collected at 17.30 minutes.....	181
<b>FIGURE 6.10:</b> Negative ion ESI mass spectra of the band at 20.20 minutes collected from the second dimension fraction cut at 6.92 minutes. ....	182
<b>FIGURE 6.11:</b> CID product ion spectra of band 3 collected at 20.20 minutes. ....	183
<b>FIGURE 6.12:</b> Contour plot of the fractions cut from the first dimension at 3.32, 3.64, 3.80, 4.20, 4.68, 5.08, 5.48, 5.88, 6.28, 6.68, 7.08, 7.48 and 7.88 minutes that were subsequently separated in the second dimension. ....	185
<b>FIGURE 6.13:</b> Three-dimensional surface representation of the fractions cut from the first dimension at 3.32, 3.64, 3.80, 4.20, 4.68, 5.08, 5.48, 5.88, 6.28, 6.68, 7.08, 7.48 and 7.88 minutes that were subsequently separated in the second dimension. ....	186
<b>FIGURE 6.14:</b> Chromatograms of consecutive fractions cut from the first dimension at 6.34 (a), 6.92 (b), 7.00 (c), 7.08 (d) and 7.16 (e) minutes and separated in the second dimension. ....	188
<b>FIGURE 7.1:</b> Optimum HPLC separation of the Bayer humic sample. Isocratic PIC A [5mM]/acetonitrile for 10min followed by a linear gradient from 100% PIC A[5mM] to 18% acetonitrile at 0.056% min <sup>-1</sup> , then 82% PIC A [5mM] and 18% acetonitrile to 57% PIC A [5mM] and 43% acetonitrile at 0.083% min <sup>-1</sup> , then 50% PIC A [5mM] and 50% acetonitrile for 5min. AU=arbitrary units. * =solvent change artefact. ....	195
<b>FIGURE 7.2:</b> Three-dimensional surface representation of the fractions cut from the first dimension at 3.32, 3.64, 3.80, 4.20, 4.68, 5.08, 5.48, 5.88, 6.28, 6.68, 7.08, 7.48 and 7.88 minutes that were subsequently separated in the second dimension. ....	200

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## LIST OF TABLES

<b>TABLE 1.1:</b> $^{13}\text{C}$ CP/MAS NMR analysis of the insoluble organic matter in deposits from a refinery operating at 250-255°C .....	17
<b>TABLE 1.2:</b> $^{13}\text{C}$ CP/MAS NMR analysis of molecular weight fractions of soluble organic matter from a refinery operating at 250-255°C .....	21
<b>TABLE 1.3:</b> Yields, pH and elemental analysis of the Bayer humic substances fractions (dry ash free basis) from a refinery operating at 250-255°C. ....	22
<b>TABLE 1.4:</b> Comparison of py-GC/MS data at 450°C between low molecular weight (<1.2 kDa) fraction from a low temperature and high temperature Bayer liquor. Selective relative abundance (%) to phenol. ....	24
<b>TABLE 3.1:</b> Elemental and pH analysis of the Bayer humic substances. ....	69
<b>TABLE 3.2:</b> Estimates of the proportions of different carbon types in the Bayer humic substances as measured by Solid-State $^{13}\text{C}$ NMR spectroscopy.....	77
<b>TABLE 4.1:</b> Solvents used for the continuous solvent extraction of the Bayer humic substances and the % yields.....	98
<b>TABLE 4.2:</b> GC/MS spectra chemical assignments for Bayer humic substances and solvent fractions.....	107
<b>TABLE 4.3:</b> Percentage composition of different carbon types in the Bayer humic substances as measured by solid-state $^{13}\text{C}$ NMR spectroscopy.....	108
<b>TABLE 5.1:</b> List of bonded stationary phase supports used in this study. ....	133
<b>TABLE 5.2:</b> System attributes used to determine the measure of orthogonality for the four chromatographic columns compared with the Luna C18 column.....	138
<b>TABLE 5.3:</b> Summary of the peak width at half height values for each of the chromatographic columns studied. ....	155
<b>TABLE 5.4:</b> Summary of the USP tailing factors for each of the chromatographic columns studied. ....	156
<b>TABLE 5.5:</b> Elution order comparison of the Luna C18 column with the four chromatographic columns chosen for this study.....	158

## ABSTRACT

Soluble organic species called humic substances are important in the Bayer process due to their adverse effect on the industrial scale production of alumina from bauxite. During the Bayer process the bauxite is subjected to a high temperature caustic digestion using sodium hydroxide. Most of the organic matter associated with the bauxite (up to 0.3%) ends up in the liquor. The soluble organic species can accumulate in the process liquor as the caustic solution is recycled for the digestion of fresh bauxite after the precipitation of the aluminium hydroxide trihydrate. In this work the humic substances were extracted from the Bayer process liquor obtained from a refinery plant operation at Kwinana Alcoa, Western Australia. The whole fraction as well as sub fractions obtained from a continuous solvent extraction were characterised by elemental and ash analysis, infrared spectroscopy, nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy and gas chromatography/mass spectrometry. High-performance liquid chromatography was used to further investigate the composition and structure of Bayer humic substances.

In this study a one-dimensional HPLC separation was developed for Bayer humic substances that achieved a level of separation previously unreported in the literature. The one-dimensional HPLC method separated the Bayer humic substances into compound classes. The analysis of solvent fractions allowed further assignment of the separation. Small molecules and three discrete clusters of macromolecules were observed that are believed to represent micellar like aggregates of different amounts of polar groups as supported by the results of the NMR, FTIR and GC/MS analyses. Within these clusters there was some degree of further resolution. Certain stable

configurations of molecular weights that are controlled by polarity through intramolecular binding were observed which provided strong evidence for a supramolecular structure to humic material rather than the existence of random conformational material.

To further enhance the one-dimensional separation, model compounds were studied to find the most appropriate reversed phase column for the separation of the type of compounds found in humic substances. Five new generation columns were studied with the Phenomenex Synergi polar-RP column found to offer the best performance in terms of separation. This column was later used in the development of the two-dimensional HPLC separation.

Finally, a two-dimensional reversed phase HPLC separation was successfully developed for the separation of Bayer humic substances using novel methodology developed in our laboratories, which successfully resolved uniform band profiles that showed promise of being essentially pure individual components. With the aid of mass spectrometric analysis of three second dimensional bands, the results of the separation strongly supported a host guest model for these compounds. It was concluded that small molecules are held in some way in some supramolecular structure by larger molecules (host guest complexes). The results suggested that the lower molecular weight material is capable of holding small guests more than larger molecular weight material making the supposition that the micellar host guest model is more probable than a model where hosts hide within the guests.